RollPlay

GM NOTEBOOK

ISSUE THIRTY-ONE

Text: Adam Koebel
Art Direction/Layout: Daniel at LiveSpace

1

Hello Patrons!

Plenty of Court of Swords prep this month! If you've followed us even since just before the 100th Episode you're witness to that most brutal truth of GMing - sometimes everything you expect is the opposite of what happens. While I planned for a few things here and there, I would never have expected the characters to end up where they are, now. So what you're seeing here are the fruits of me solidifying my loose ideas into a fuller campaign setting. Fundamentally, we're seeing some brand new thing and maybe these notes will inspire your own campaign!

If you dig what you see, there are some videos to accompany some of my prep at http://youtube.com/adamkoebel as well.

Thank you so much for your support, and welcome to Issue 31 of the GM's Notebook.

Adam Koebel
RollPlay GM

2

Table of Contents

Court of Swords Episode 102 / 103 Notes 6

Far Verona Episode 24 / 25 Notes 8

Court of Swords Episode 103 Continued 10

Court of Swords GM Prep: Court of the Void 12

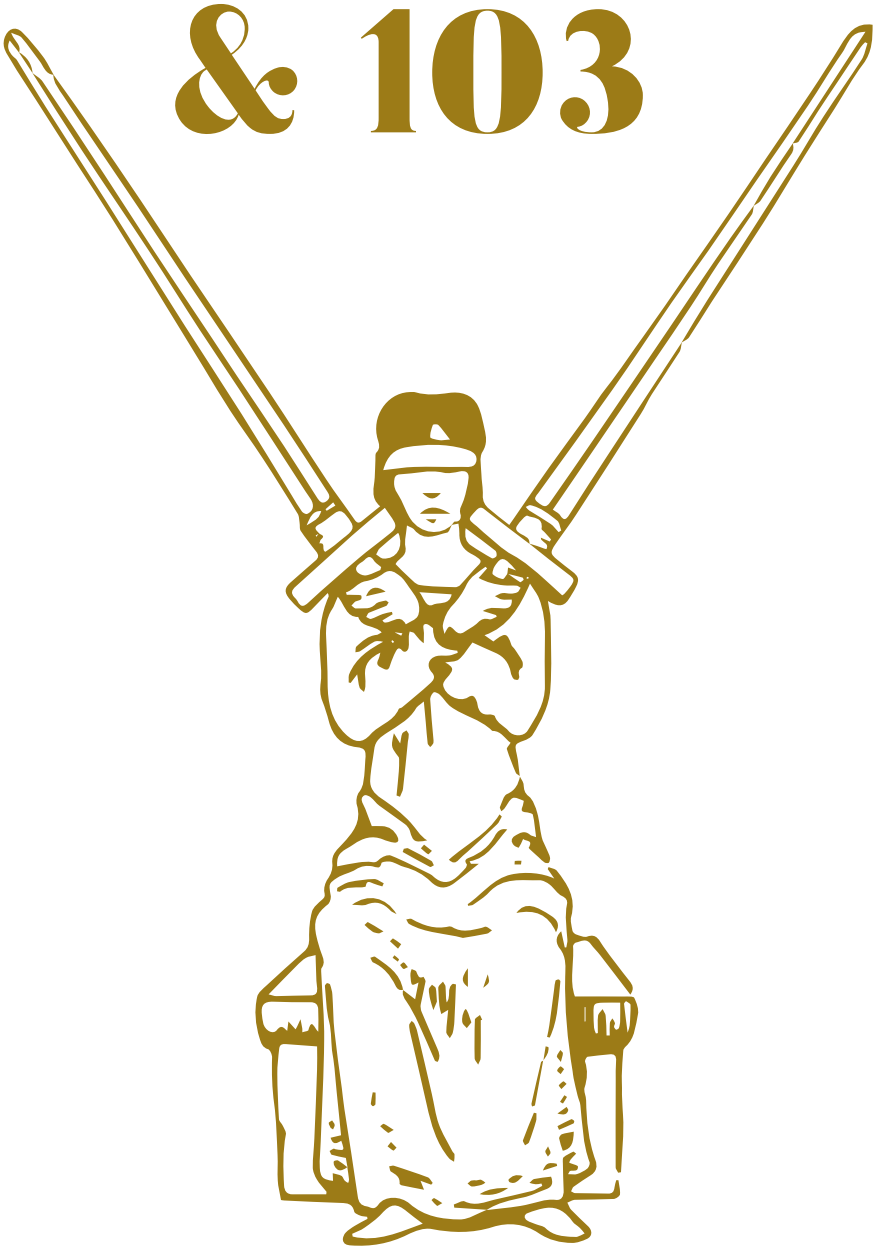
Court of Swords GM Prep: Episode 105+ 18

**Court of Swords GM Prep:
The Necropolis Opportunity 22**

3

Court of Swords:

Episode 102 & 103



Court of Swords: 102

[60 hours of unconsciousness.] ~~||| |||| |||| |||~~

[30 hours of confusion on dmy] |||| |||| |||| |||

- they approach the Monastery, once a glorious compound for all holy worship. now a fortress and citadel of the King of Black Rivers, housing his Lieutenant Grave Dirt and her advisor, Tenken-ka No Zio Kel (called now Abbott Rama)

- the place is an unholy one, desanctified and low - it's also a fortress and camp for those loyal to the King here the PCs will have to tread carefully or risk the ire of Grave Dirt

  1) Grave Dirt knows Ramus is important. She's jealous and wants to get rid of him

  2) Abbott Rama's mind is clouded, he barely remembers Yotta at all...

They both know about the doorway but not the key, which they attempt to purloin if they learn of it. their main goal is forbidden knowledge and dark enlightenment, as well as party politics: they want to grow their influence with their King, who encourages this among his followers.

"Strength comes from within; our souls belong to us."

"Heaven was built on lies, prayers are shackles that bind us to that lie."

"We must relearn what we were told: reject our parents, reject the priest, reject the courts"

> Prosperous Rabbit, a father of many kids

[Doctor Tanawat, camp physician.]

"Bert" = Berg "Kabir" = Maharib

"Brian" = Ramus

[Sergeant Tray]

Court of Swords 103

- begin with a scene of Grave Dirt being told that the camp has visitors: the son of Abbot Rama returns with the Ramus Krill and "two brutes" and illustrate her curious displeasure at Ramus' being here - she's jealous and possessive of the Monastery and might see the PCs as a threat to her hold, here.

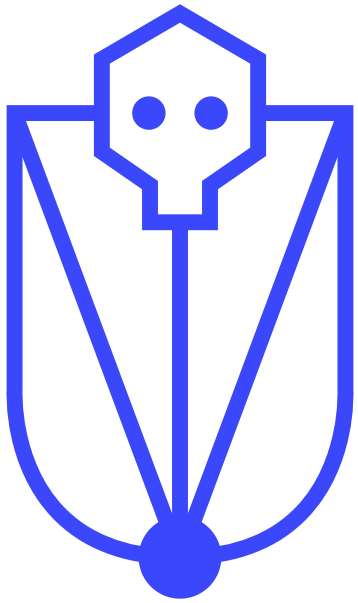
- "Rama" is in holy seclusion and cannot be bothered - the old Loxodon is being used as a vessel + channel for Mara energy. If the PCs sneak in / get to him by force, he is addled but hopes to share his wisdom

- Grave Dirt will send them on a mission to kill an enemy of the people, a Court Captain named Southern Wind. This is a test <u>or</u> a way to rid herself of them. Win-win, really.

4.

FAR VERONA:

EPISODE 24 AND 25



Far Verona: Episode 24 cont'd

- there is some kind of conspiracy involving the IA and the church and the Serpens Assassin - this is what Nomi and the Crusader are looking into; what's it about, what's their goal?
- the Assassin is being transfered to a TL5 facility in the Expanse
- Nomi wants "MI6 for Serpens" probably hidden, something where visiting Serpens agents can stay
  - nomi got a 7-9, additional complications to come
  - has a cousin on world who can help her out (make this NPC)
- the safehouse has the facade of mundanity (secret entrance! behind a portrait - leads into an alley)
- a dead man in the cab! killed by synths! The Serpens who arranged the house.

↳ the dead man is a house Serpens Scryer, who was looking into the rumors that a cell of Synths had infiltrated the Embassy District: turns out, they were, and now he's dead as fuck. the Synths killed him + dumped the body, not as a message but just to be rid of him. His throat was cut and he bled out. He was robbed.

Far Verona: Episode 25

Booker: Solve the case of the dead Serpens.
Nomi: Make contact with the Immortal Association.
Gabriel: Prevent any harm coming to the squad.
Bicky:

* the cab operator knows it was meddled

* info request on Friedrich Laye

the Synth:

Jun Ariake
C3: EUOT-2FE

} she killed the Serpens

1st Lt. Robert Modesto
- independent consultant
- former deathless
- nerve damage, walks with cane
- loves Bicky, crocheting

[Serpens Scryer: Friedrich Laye, anti-synth agent.]

> Kriegsherr Salome Ferraro, "Sally" (booker 11) knows Booker (friendly)
- split after the academy
- rivalry, some romance

Susan = ass't

> Abbott Jaqueline Meade (chaplain 3)
- disagreed w/ Gabe over killing an asset
- works for a family of Triumvirum

molly parker

Scryer Eli Albans: hates Crux and Synths, dead wife and kids.

There's a synth in the Crux comms office.

" start w/ a shot @ the crusader: the Crux leak! "

5

Court of Swords:

Episode 103 Continued

CoS 103 Cont'd

- Southern Wind (human, they/them) has been brokering a deal with a nearby hill dwarf clan: to employ their warriors in a campaign to eventually take back the Monastery. They, and some soldiers, and a wagon of Court gold, are staying with the dwarves in the mountains about five days from here.

Front: Southern Wind

- [x] Court of Swords troops arrive in the dwarven hold, begin dealmaking
- [ ] The dwarves agree to supply troops, bolstering Southern Wind
- [ ] A plan of attack is drawn up and prepared, supplies are gathered
- [ ] The attack begins
- [ ] The Monastery, mostly destroyed by Dwarven weapons + zeal, is reclaimed by Southern Wind

* what do the Mara's followers call themselves

Heaven = "the Pure Land"

Sun priests beg the Sun to return, not to leave us in darkness.

- Ultimately, the idea here is that Grave Dirt's position is somewhat tenuous, that without reinforcement she won't be able to hold the temple for very long before the (admittedly pretty scrappy) troops of the Court push her back South again. This is one of those "let the various movements of the PCs decide the ultimate fate of the situation" moments.

- If the PCs decide to fight against Grave Dirt, she'll need a front as well (though, she's a pretty ill-advised ally when it comes to it, given her jealous nature). Maybe a second "inevitable betrayal" Front could be of some value.

- the various people of the Monastery are somewhat apolitical, in the sense that this big cosmological struggle doesn't really concern them: they want freedom and prosperity on the ground, now. The cultural imperative that heaven has set up is sort of a forethought.

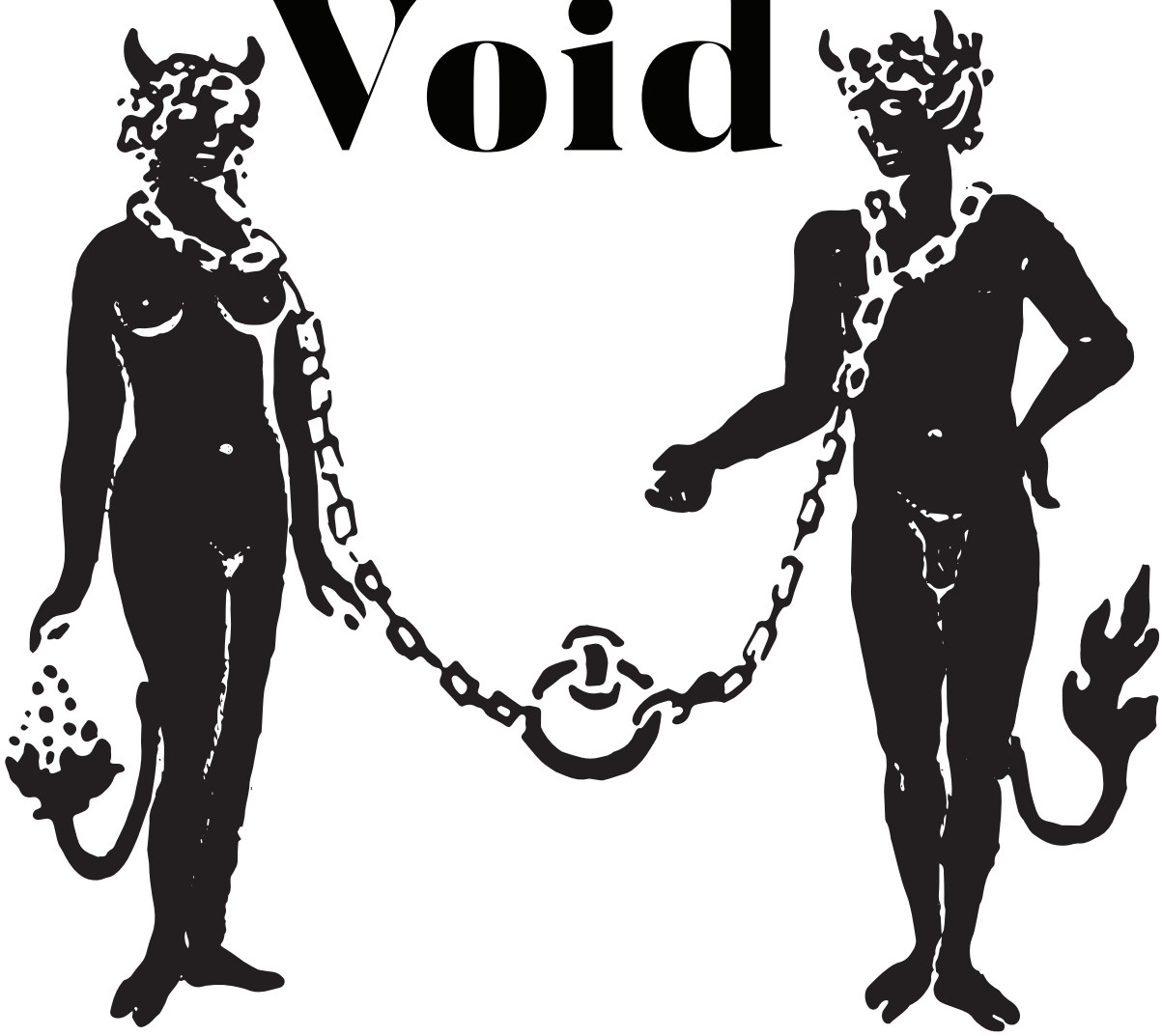
[side note: NE Coins / N cups -> Himalayas / Hokkaido, big mountain chain with tons of ice + snow. Bears. in this setting: firbolgs are yeti!]

[Old soldier Nattapong. Makes good soup.] Hot Shrimp Legion

6

Court of Swords GM Prep:

Court of the Void



Inspirations

- **Stygia / the Shadowlands (Wraith) (minus dead stuff)**
- **Wherever Frodo goes when he puts the Ring on**
- **The Shadowfell (D&D)**
- **Malfeas (Exalted)**
- **The Inner Earth or whatever from Banner Saga**

What it's not

HELL

Hell is an invention of Heaven for punishing bad Karma, an unpopular project recently gaining some momentum for reinstatement.

THE UNDERWORLD

Souls either get reprocessed, reincarnated or trapped in their bodies forming undead. There's no place for wandering ghosts, no purgatory, etc.

A MIRROR WORLD / A REFLECTION OF REALITY

While it does take the shape of some of realities structures and places, it is its own world with a 10,000 year history

A CONSTANT SHADOW

The Court of the Void is more like a flashbulb gone off or the burn on a wall from a nuclear blast. It's set the way it is, barring the actions of people and entities.

The Rules

I. Spellcasting operates as normal, with Divine spells being variably useful (A DC 10+ religion check required to cast based on how close to a Vein one is)

II. Nothing can die here. *(but you can suffer - you need to eat, drink, sleep, etc.)*

III. Nothing can be born, nothing grows.

IV. It is not a barren wasteland, there are people here

V. The rules change the closer to a Vein you are - things there are more like reality

VI. Civilization tends to cluster around the largest Veins, there are cities, fortresses and the like all gathered around these places - they are powerful, valuable and controlled by the Mara themselves

VII. Causality continues because if it didn't we couldn't use this place in a narrative, obviously - maybe time flows differently here depending on proximity to a Vein

VIII. Time, however, doesn't - things don't decay, things can't be born, people don't die or get old

IX. Stasis is the rule

X. Obviously Warlocks are a thing here, especially the darker pacts - warlocks serve either the ambient energies of the void (your master is a whispering void in your head telling you to give up) or serve a Mara directly, getting power from their patronage.

XI. No night or day, but a cycle of white moon and green sun turning in the sky - always kind of dusk out

XII. Two significant times - Moon Dominant and Sun Dominant, at Moon Dominant all that which was destroyed returns to form, at Sun Dominant, when the Veins glow brightest

The Mara

I. Living, walking entities

II. Gods among their worshippers

III. Generally, they control the Veins and fight over them (no set agenda outside their shared hatred of Heaven)

IV. Take many and varied forms

V. The greatest among them is an insensate god-worm of the Void that commonly takes the shape of a colossal and majestic green phallus

VI. Other known Mara - the Black Doctor, the Dragon Knight, the Dandy…

VII. Both hate and are envious of creation and heaven, they want to usurp that power not necessarily destroy it. They're not entirely sure what they'd do if they won.

VIII. Have armies, servants and agents throughout the Court of the Void and within reality which they use against Heaven and each other

IX. For the most part have their own internal structure, some are chaos or anarchy, some are highly codified

X. Maybe one has a kind of Court of Mockery thing where it appoints a King of Thorns, a Queen of Lies, a Page of Fiends and a Knight of Shit

The People

XI. The Court of the Void is populated primarily by humans, Void Genasi and Tieflings, with the latter tracing their lineage to one of the Mara themselves

XII. all Tieflings in reality are of the same stock but diluted and changed by Heaven. Tieflings are basically a rounding error or a glitch in the programming in creation but down here they're just another native people.

XIII. Void Genasi (using the Shadar-kai) aka the Half-Dead are people who were human once but who suffered mortal wounds, bodily destruction or other calamity but were reformed by the bleak energy of this place. Brought back better rather than worse.

XIV. Humans are just humans, albeit ones who live forever and can never die.

XV. Can be reshaped, reformed and redesigned by a Guild of Fleshcrafters who can make semi-permanent, respawn-resistant alterations to the body using the Juice.

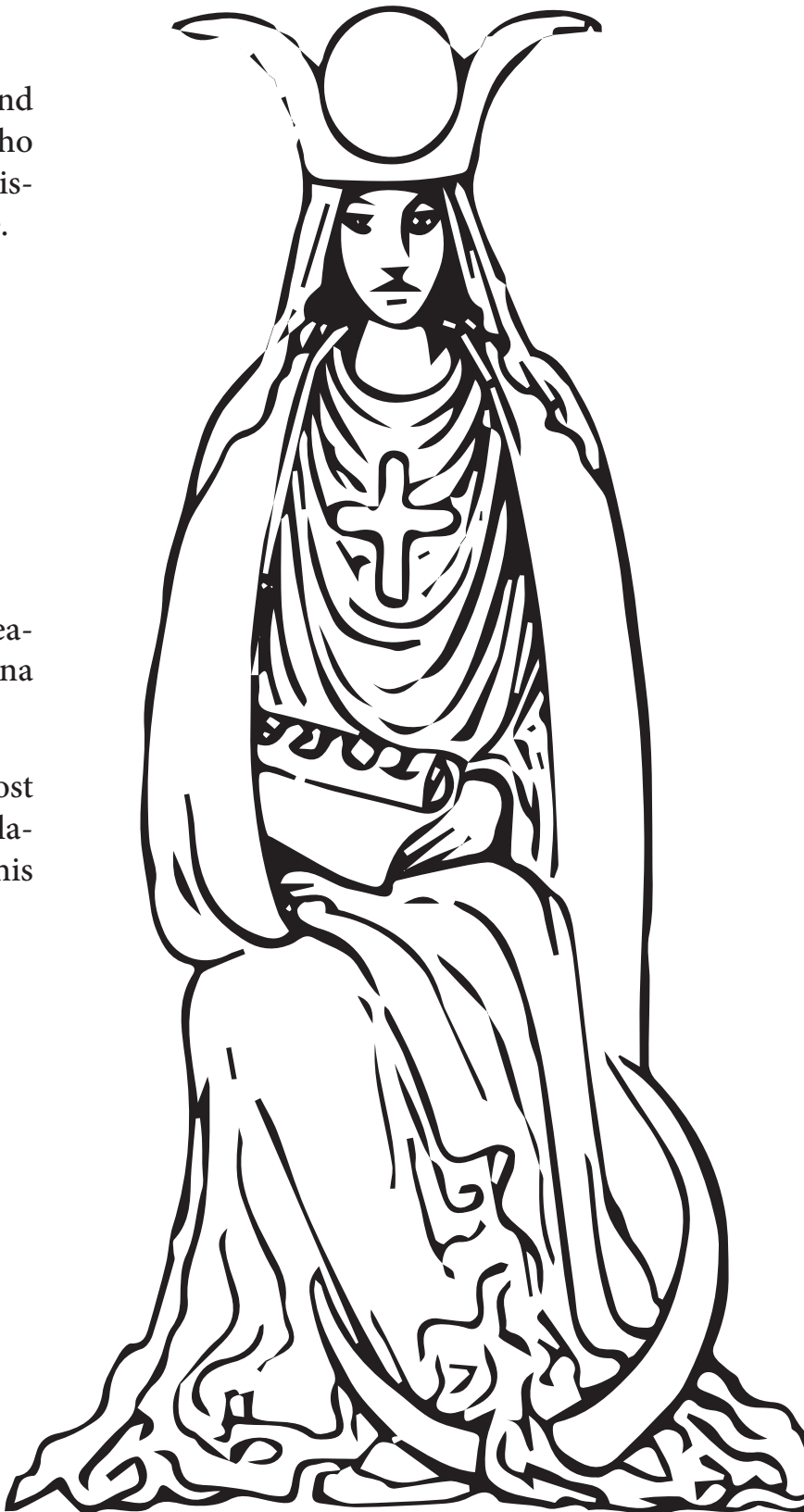
Other Occupants

XVI. Shadowy versions of many creatures from reality, a plethora of native fauna and flora reflected darkly

XVII. Some unique entities, some lost souls who wandered into a vein, miscellaneous creatures who could only exist in this weird place

XVIII. No orcs, no dwarves, no gnomes or aasimar or goliaths or whatever

XIX. no gods though some aspects of the place might have taken on a kind of god-like cognizant loci operation - you may find Divine Ghosts here but they're not Gods as we know them



7

Court of Swords GM Prep:

Episode 105+

What Do The Players Do Here

SESSION 105+

Basically for this session I have to wing it, because without player goals in advance, all I can do is understand the world and set it before them to explore and discover. Probably they'll want to find their way out, which means…

- ☑ Learn how to transit between the Court and Reality
- ☑ Learn where to find a Vein
- ☑ Learn how to travel between worlds
- ☑ Find a Vein to use
- ☑ Get access to it
- ☑ Do the thing
- ☑ Go home

The Vein they traveled through to get here has closed, as is the nature of these smaller incursions - they tend to open and close more or less at random (this is how we get Void entities wandering unbidden into the world and how we get stories of people being lost and never coming back - they walk into a Vein by accident)

PRIORITIES FOR THE SESSION

» illustrate the strange new world they live in, show them how it works and give them an idea of how different it is

» portray the world neutrally - this place isn't good or evil, as with everything else, but different and strange

» Make them feel alone and isolated but only up to a point - introduce that this is a place where people live, too

» Give them a chance to formulate plans - do they want to explore and learn more or do they want to get the fuck out of here

» Make them panic a little - until they eat the food of this place, flesh or fruit it matters not, they cannot be a part of its cycle, cannot rest, cannot receive the blessings of the White Moon

LONGER TERM GOALS

» Whatever Mara is the most friendly / likely to help / whatever is also at war most aggressively with whoever the closest Mara is - this way if they want, or somehow even manage to learn that there might be help here, they have to go to great lengths to get it

» Show them the Mara in conflict

» Do not over-humanize their strangeness - keep the Mara at a relative distance but show their servants directly, and in a human light (this is as a contrast to the Gods and gods, who are affected by humanity and take their likeness in some way)

» Determine the PCs purpose here and craft the narrative towards that purpose

STAKES QUESTIONS

» What is Ramus' new soul made of, who made it, etc?

It was created by the Mara to fool Heaven - they made it so that Ramus could sneak in and fuck around in Heaven, it's a Mara Trojan Horse Ramus situation. The King of Black Rivers and his servant Grave Dirt and ostensibly the people who made this gift know its purpose and as a result, want him to fulfill it. A "new soul" hasn't been created in 555 billion years or however long everything has existed.

SCENES IN POTENTIA

» Show them the nature of time in this place, hunger and thirst are still here with you but different - give them a chance to see Moon Dominant and the return to stasis

» An encounter with some local wildlife while exploring the temple - creatures drawn to the Vein and to the sudden explosion of energy

» Show them some Vein Hunters - a group of Tieflings, Humans and Void Genasi who come to investigate the Vein that they recently travelled through - the Vein hunters want to make money, get famous and become powerful, and will utilize the PCs to those ends if they think it's at all possible, though Too Much Talk might realize there's something funny about Ramus.

– ***Formidable Gun-Princess of Black Onyx*** *(they/them) A Tiefling born into the Bloodline of a foreign Mara, who has come here to escape their parentage and the bonds of blood (maybe the Mara they "belong" to is some kind of ownership cult where this person was a blood slave due to their lineage) a fighter / rogue type, swashbuckler, bravado-filled gunslinger (maggot shooting doom gun - slug thrower)*

– ***Too Much Talk, Too Little Action*** *(he/him) A Void Genasi cleric / prophet type, a living dowsing rod and sensitive to the hum of the Veins - he is the one who leads his partners to the good shit and they do the heavy lifting. Is empowered with visions and haunted by strange spirits.*

– ***The Business*** *(she/her) a retired soldier, a human who once served a now-missing Mara lord whose servants were scattered to the five corners of the Void. She is the one who backed this operation and who owns their manor-house in the city two weeks travel from here.*

8

Court of Swords GM Prep:

The Necropolis Opportunity

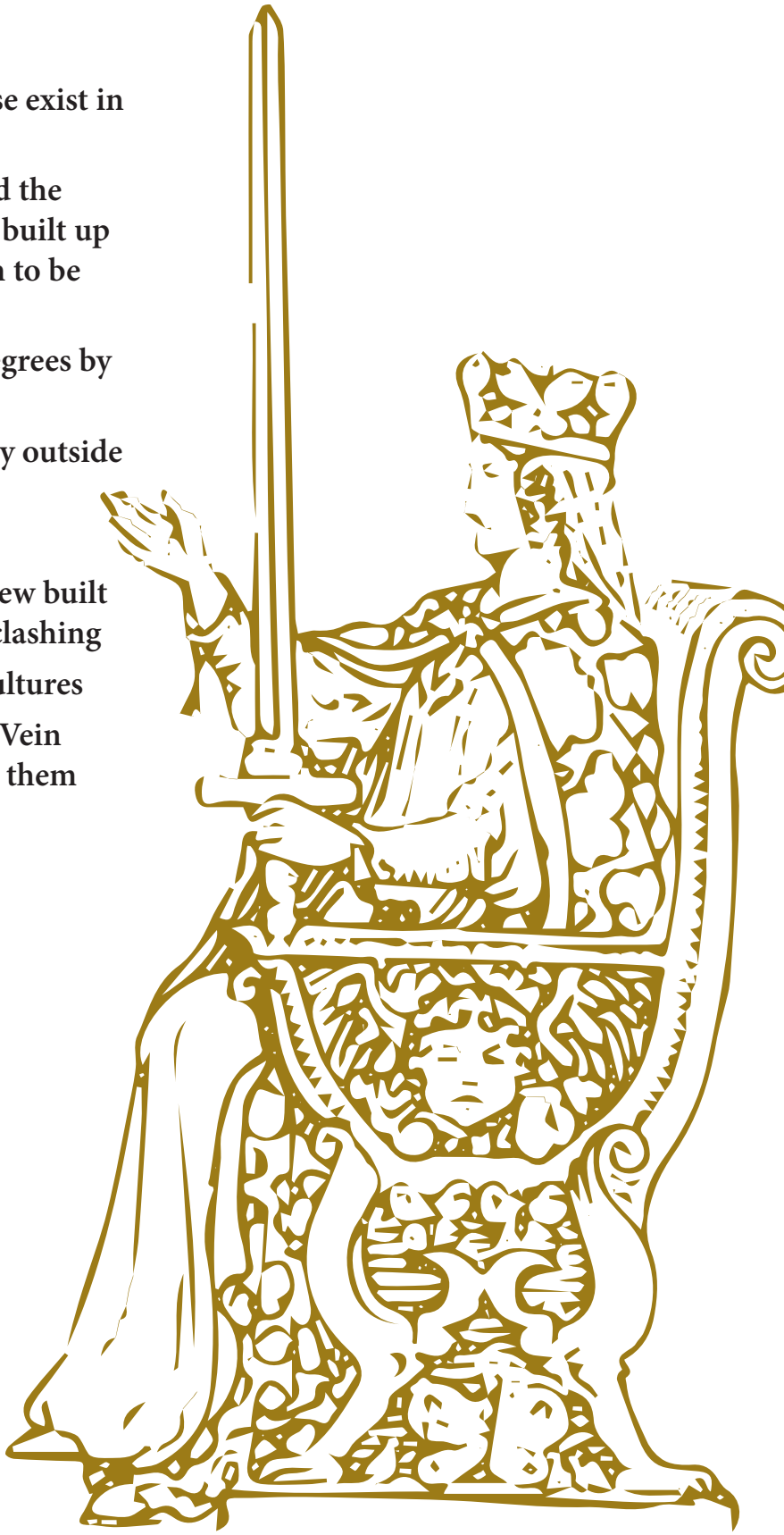
Opportunity

WHAT IS IT?

- Not a city, not a fortress, though those exist in the Court of the Void
- It's the accumulated construction and the creatures that dwell in it that has been built up around a Vein strong and deep enough to be stable
- As a result, it is desired in varying degrees by the Mara
- Uncontrolled, contested and probably outside anyone's particular purview
- Turbulent city-state
- A mash of architectural styles - the new built on the old, various Maraic influences clashing
- Mash of distinct and semi-distinct cultures
- Flush with murder hobos - plenty of Vein Hunters come here, lots of services for them

INSPIRATIONS

- Post-war Berlin
- Interzone, Tangier
- Deadwood
- Old Yarnham



WHAT'S SPECIAL ABOUT IT?

This territory of the world is undergoing a gold rush of Vein Hunting - because of the influence of the Necromancer King and the ten-year war against the Court, the veil between here and the real world is especially thin, but Veins that appear are temporary and unpredictable.

WHAT'S SPECIAL ABOUT IT?

Opportunity is the site of a conflict between three Mara, all of whom lay claim by right of force, of territory and by simple right that they deserve the place. This conflict is both martial - there are armed elements that clash in the streets and cultural / practical - people are being bribed, power structures being built, etc. As a result, the city is dangerous, unpredictable and its rules and protocols change constantly, depending on who is in charge and where the wind blows.

The Belligerents

THE PRINCE OF DRAGONS

A Mara who takes the form of either a great and terrible shadow worm, a dragon of unmistakable power and rage or of a beleaguered and fallen knight, whose tabard is torn and armor rent, but who moves with a dread purpose.

wants: to seize direct control of Opportunity and add it to his demense of provinces, he is a conqueror for its own sake, who wants it mainly because he has it naught

gets it by: martial control - the Knights in his service who operate here do so directly, with violence. They are the primary source of martial distress here, and when they're not fighting the other Mara's forces they're picking fights with anyone who talks shit or looks at them wrong. Thugs pretending to nobility. Ronin, bad samurai, etc.

THE FOOL, INVERSE

A jester and maker of japes. Who sits atop a strict hierarchy of inverted positions based on Heaven's design but flipped. Attended by priests of the Arcana, Inverse and who lives to mock and mimic Heaven cruelly.

wants: the Vein, not because of the power or riches they might derive from it but because it may give them more access to the real world, which they need to understand the target of their scorn. The Fool, Inverse is an obsessive maniac when it comes to the real world - they cannot get enough of it.

gets it by: subterfuge and coin, they're rich and have influence much more subtle than their foes, also likely to be the best liked of the three - they give away money, hold shows and performances and sponsor (and have forever) Vein Hunters directly.

HE WHOSE NAME IS A PAEAN TO THE BLACK ABYSS, FOREVER SWIRLING BELOW, HUNGRY AND WAITING

A bishop of the blackness, a deacon of darkness, He Whose Name believes in the divinity of the Void and serves what he believes to be its dark whispers. Those who serve He Whose Name are monks, priests, itinerants and proselytizers of the universal end of all things - when all creation sinks into the Void and is undone.

wants: power for the abyss, to serve the void and believes that this place is important to the plans of the Great Perpetual Nothing, and as a result, wants it.

gets it by: social control, they control minds (metaphorically and literally) and by magic, their servants **do** gain significant power from the Void - they are Warlocks and Clerics of Darkness who are to a one, touched by the same whispers that He Whose Name has heard.

WHO ELSE?

– The citizens of Opportunity, who came here looking for a way to live free, many escaped previous Mara masters or needed to go somewhere in the Outlands where they could hide from previous crimes

– The Hunters Guild of Those Who Tap the Vein, an organization of semi-loyal, kind-of-connected Vein Hunters.

Significant Locations

THE VEIN ITSELF

- central location
- guarded by Dragon Knights, but also watched by the other two
- A massive and deep sinkhole which glows with the eerie light of reality, night and day
- Surrounded by ruins and abandoned homes, the Vein creates a neighborhood nobody can live in
- Ground zero for weird reality radiation

THE LODGE GLORIOUS

- the home and barracks of the servants of the Dragon Prince
- the neighborhood surrounding it is the most lawful, patrolled regularly with a curfew and laws posted on every corner

THE BASILICA ILLUSTRIOUS OF VOICELESS PSALMS SUNG UNTO DEAF EARS

- Home base of the Priesthood of the Void, who serve He Whose Name, and spiritual center of Opportunity
- A place to come and learn the Truth of the Void, and to be blessed by its cold hand
- A social center and meeting hall, as well as a place of worship

THE DIVINE COMEDY

– a combination circus, theatre and festhall, where the Fool, Inverse houses servants, holds court and performances

– an all-cycles cavalcade of entertainment - where rich Vein Hunters can spend their coin for drugs, drink, or a little love

MISS TIPPET'S HOME FOR FUTURE CORPSES

– an Inn and Tavern that serves all, but focuses on Vein Hunters

– a meeting place, a neutral ground for Vein Hunters

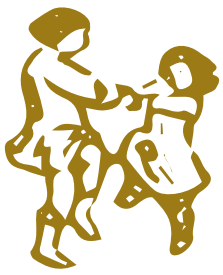
– run by an ancient Vein Hunter named Miss Tippet, who retired and left the world for the Outlands and counts herself among the first "citizens" of Opportunity

– you can visit the taproom, or get a room in the inn but if you want to visit the back room, you need a membership in the Hunter's Guild

GREYMARKET

– an open-air market where Vein Hunters sell their services and their weird goods found through Hunting

– a place to buy pure or processed "Juice" (Fountain energy leaked through the Veins)



NPCS:

– Miss Tippet, a tiefling with a sort of grumply grandmotherly attitude, but who used to be a huge badass and might be encouraged to do so again, if she had to. Used to be married to Mister Nice Guy.

– Mister Nice Guy, a human market-stall owner and broker of deals among the Vein Hunters (played by John Rhys-Davies). Used to be married to Miss Tippet.

– Officiant 24-89B, a tiefling born into a bloodline of some kind of machine-mara, whose children all are part of lesser hivemind, and who engineered much of the identification protocols, and who all serve as clerks in the Office of Identification
(an old friend of The Business)

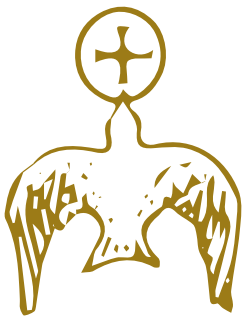
– Obstinate Bugfucker, human owner of a small independent slugfarm on the outskirts, human, constantly covered in mud and larvae, likes insects better than people, but thinks Gun Princess isn't so bad.

– Infinitely Polished Scale of Loyalty, a Dragon Knight and garrison commander of the Lodge Glorious

– The Knight (a mewling whelp, weak and sad), the Page (a brutal monster, huge and terrible), the King (a young girl) and the Queen (an old man) of Necropolis Opportunity - four "players" in the Divine Comedy, who run things there for The Fool, Inverse.

– The Deacon of Blood and Ash, Fallen From His Sight Into Shadow in the Outlands, The Retributor and Kneeler-Before-the-Altar (aka Fallen from Sight or Deacon of Blood and Ash aka Kneeler or Kneel derisively) who is the high priest of the Basilica Illustrious (played by Max von Sydow)

– Where Did I Leave My Aorta? a Fleshcrafter who the friend Vein Hunters owe a great deal of Juice to. A strange "human" with extra arms, eyes, ears and other appendages who belongs to a school of Fleshcrafters called The Maximalists.



COMPLICATIONS:

Everyone in the Court of the Void has "identification papers", showing who they belong to, Mara-wise. Everyone should be accounted for. If you don't have papers, anyone can come along and claim you. The PCs, of course, do not have such identification.

Multiple parties within the Necropolis want them for their flesh, their presence, want to kill them or capture them for a Mara zoo - they're strangers in a strange land and everyone who finds out about them will want them.

Their new friends haven't decided what they think of these people - a big enough bribe or offer of support might sway them to sell the PCs off.

They don't understand the world they're in, nor the rules thereof. The PCs are likely to offend or upset someone more powerful than they are, which could lead to trouble or danger for them, depending on who it is!

COMPLICATIONS:

– they want a way home, which would require access to a Vein powerful enough to sustain the ritual to keep it open and make a window out of a door

I. A place to do the thing

II. Someone who knows the ritual for the thing

III. Something to empower the ritual itself, the magical mcguffin that makes it work.

– survive and avoid trouble with local power

– keep any individual Mara from taking control of the Vein, which would dramatically reduce the likelihood they'd get access to it

– hunt down and find an alternate but powerful Vein before it gets claimed